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TAGS: [NATO](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [FR](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: FRENCH DOMESTIC CONCERNS DRIVE TIMELINE ON NATO  
REINTEGRATION, AFGHANISTAN AND THE NATO SUMMIT

REF: A. PARIS 114  
[1](#)B. PARIS POINTS 2-5-2009

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark A. Pekala for  
reasons 1.4(b) and  
(d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Elysee Strategic Affairs Advisor Francois Richier outlined on February 3 some of the French domestic hurdles that will drive developments in the next couple of months on the announcement of French reintegration into NATO, possible authorization of troop reinforcements in Afghanistan and organization of the April NATO summit. The Elysee is operating with a carefully planned roll-out of issues, in an effort to de-link potential controversies and prevent public and parliamentary opposition from leapfrogging off one issue to encompass others. Formal parliamentary briefings on NATO reintegration set for February 18 will be the first challenge, as parliamentarians have an array of possible options for action, from approving the plan in committee or forcing it to a vote in open plenary session (possibly even including it with a motion of censure). Opposition to the war in Afghanistan has previously been used as an argument against reintegration, so the GOF continues to downplay the possibility of troop reinforcements "at this time" for domestic political reasons. In addition, Paris hopes to have the discussion of Afghanistan reinforcements at an ISAF ministerial meeting in advance of the NATO summit, rather than at the summit itself, which would present logistical challenges and could overshadow the themes of Alliance unity and France's reintegration. They also want to avoid any potential embarrassment in case the number of increased contributions by European countries is disproportionately low compared to U.S. commitments. For these same reasons, the GOF does not do not support a meeting with partners such as Russia, Ukraine or Georgia. End summary.

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Key Parliamentary Debate  
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[1](#)2. (C) Richier noted that while public opinion polls are largely favorable to France's return to the integrated military command of NATO, the French public is also in general not well informed about France's current role in the alliance or about the potential benefits or risks of reintegration. For this reason, the Elysee considers public support to be "fragile" and easily reversed. Richier noted that public opinion also favored support for the EU "constitution" in 2005, but it dropped precipitously after some contentious public debates. French officials are convinced that the opposition will attempt to mingle the issues of Afghanistan reinforcements and reintegration. Therefore they are trying to manage the timeline so that potentially controversial announcements on Afghanistan would occur after the reintegration debate. Richier regretted that

the current relationship with Parliament is "not good," despite the governing party's majority, due to some controversial domestic reform issues.

13. (C) Richier said that the GOF was managing the roll-out of French NATO reintegration plans in "bits and pieces" to minimize risk. The steering committees of the relevant defense and foreign affairs committees in the National Assembly and Senate have already been informally briefed on GOF plans for reintegration in January. According to both Richier and MFA Strategic Affairs Advisor Jacques Audibert, these briefings went well, with "no surprises" and little expressed opposition. However, the GOF is bracing for the formal briefing of the full committees by DefMin Morin and FM Kouchner on February 18. These will be public sessions with the possibility of dramatic polemics by opposition politicians. The parliamentarians may then choose to approve the plan in committee, or could request a plenary debate, which may or may not be followed by a vote. The Elysee clearly prefers that there be no vote on this issue, as it is not constitutionally required and would only pose an additional hurdle. Richier noted that if the opposition is really feeling feisty, they could also call for a motion of censure tied to the reintegration vote. In this worst case scenario, the government could both lose the vote and fall as a consequence. While these potential but highly unlikely consequences are severe enough to help ensure the support of wavering parliamentarians, this example does illustrate the serious domestic concerns driving the communications roll-out.

14. (C) The GOF has recently begun a concerted communication push to strengthen support for its agenda, beginning with the publication on February 4 of a joint op-ed by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Sarkozy on

strengthening European security. That article specifically mentioned the need for ensuring security in Afghanistan for civilian governance to succeed, and it highlighted the importance of the 60th anniversary summit with a united Alliance capable of reflection on its future. After a period with little press interest, French news sources have also begun to seize on the issue of France's NATO reintegration with intense interest in recent days over the command posts that France expects to receive and what would be their commensurate influence within the Alliance (ref B). This interest is expected to grow over the next weeks until the NATO summit.

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REINFORCEMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN  
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15. (C) Recent post reporting (ref A) indicates possible military and civilian support to increase French contributions in Afghanistan. However, GOF sensitivities remain evident as DefMin Morin continues to publicly downplay expectations of troop reinforcements "at this time" as part of the GOF public relations effort to de-link an "American war" from the reintegration debate. While Jacques Audibert, MFA Strategic Affairs Director, and Richier have promised "full engagement" and a "positive message" respectively, no one is willing to discuss further details until the reintegration debate is completed.

16. (C) Richier informed us that Paris views the decision on Afghanistan as one of the most important questions related to the April 3-4 summit in Strasbourg/Kehl/Baden-Baden. He claimed that French officials want the message on Afghanistan "to be positive for the U.S., as well as for us." This is why Paris supports having an expanded ISAF meeting in advance of the NATO summit, rather than on the margins of the meeting itself. In addition to the difficult logistical challenge that hosting some 50 delegations would pose in the small towns of Strasbourg and Kehl, French officials want the Afghanistan question resolved early on optical grounds: they don't want it to overshadow the positive themes of unity and French reintegration which they hope to showcase at the summit instead. Richier added that Paris wants to avoid the

possibility of embarrassment should NATO partners not be able to announce sufficient new commitments. Currently, Richier said France supports having a special meeting of ISAF contributors at the end of March, which gives new USG administration officials additional time to prepare.

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NATO SUMMIT AND PARTNERS  
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¶7. (C) The second challenge for the NATO summit from the French point of view remains what to do about Russia. Richier stated that the GOF does not support having a meeting with Russian President Medvedev at the NATO summit. He said that Russian announcements of a new naval base in the breakaway province of Abkhazia would make such a meeting with NATO partners inappropriate. In addition, Richier observed that if NATO had a meeting with Russia, it would in fairness also have to hold meetings with other partners such as Ukraine. Again, the GOF wants to keep the 60th anniversary summit an event for members only to reflect on their priorities and plans for the future of NATO.

¶8. (C) Comment: Richier made clear that French officials would adhere to a carefully orchestrated timeline as they roll out decisions on NATO reintegration and Afghanistan in order to avoid a domestic upset. The parliamentary vote this month will be a crucial test on whether the government plan on reintegration will be approved quietly or whether a rejuvenated opposition will seize upon it as a lightning rod tied in with an unpopular war and difficult domestic reforms. Because of these sensitivities, we should not expect senior French officials to engage in more detailed discussions about Afghanistan until they have cleared their initial parliamentary hurdles, as they risk having both plans derailed by mismanaged leaks or polemics. End comment.

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